

WE GENDER: AND SO CAN YOU!

by

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

The following writing is a collection of thoughts and explanations of my choreographic thesis project, which was a practice in combining two unique art forms: Drag and modern dance. In this process, I was asked, “Do you have a point of view beyond ‘Drag is good?’” My ideas revolving around my project have shapeshifted and upon reflection of my process and the resulting performance, I have found that in addition to being “good,” Drag can be a powerful tool to examine our daily performances of gender.

This thesis describes my creative process in combining Drag and modern dance elements, culminating in the performance of my evening-length work “We Gender: And So Can You!” I approached the art forms through the lens of an ex-Mormon invested in queer and feminist theories. I wanted to explore modern dance and Drag because I find the two art forms as transcendent and liberating of the restrictive discourse in which I was raised. Here I illustrate my identity as a repressed homosexual before I discovered both modern dance and Drag. I also investigate self-expression through modern dance. Following my discussion on modern dance, I lay out my creative process of nine performance pieces and discuss the performance at Metro Music Hall in Salt Lake City on March 24, 2017.

This thesis is dedicated to Amanda Davis, who plays a triple role in my life as sister, academic mentor, and best friend. Without her, I could not have completed this milestone.

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Last, but not least, I would like to thank my performers who appeared in my thesis event. I hope that you can look back on this process and performance fondly. Thank you for lending not only your physical exertion and time, but also your stories relating to gender.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My personal working definitions are:

#### Mo\*dern Dance

/ˈmädərn dans/

*noun*

1. a fairly young dance form (when compared to ballet, folk, or ballroom) in which the movement combinations and creative approaches are seemingly endless.  
“Is modern dance the form where they pretend to be trees for eight counts?”  
*Synonyms: Contemporary, The weird bare foot stuff*

#### Drag

/drag/

*noun*

1. the art of extreme transformation and dress up, a sort of make-believe and pretend. I go by the stage name of Janice Janice Janice when I am performing in Drag.  
“Some people are offended by Drag. I want to show them that it is indeed an art form that can celebrate life, color, diversity, and freedom.”  
*Drag is not to be confused with casual cross-dressing.*

### What Is Drag?

On *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009 – ongoing), the reality-based competition show, contestants are given the directive to “Sashay away” when eliminated from the contest.



When Jaymes Mansfield was dismissed from season 9, she<sup>1</sup> exclaimed “later shapeshifters” (as in goodbye) to the remaining contestants. This moment has caused me to reflect over my participation in modern dance and Drag. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was in fact my first positive exposure to Drag. I fell in love with several of the performers on the reality television series, feeling a kinship of gender play and silliness. These performers inspired me to compete in the first (known) Drag pageant located in Utah county, in which I was awarded first runner-up.

Since my exposure to Drag through *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, my own position as an observant participant in the local community in Utah, and my research in the pursuit of a Gender Studies graduate certificate, I have come to the following definition: Drag is performative gender play. It is the donning of outrageous attire and makeup to create an illusion, to present a fantasy and an alternate reality through a complex interplay of appearance and movement. It is often presented as a “secret, and everyone is in on it” (Piane, 2009). Judith Butler, author of the seminal gender studies text, *Gender Trouble* (1990), wrote that “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself... by means of a performance” (p. 175), a performance that breaks down the distinctiveness of sex and gender into “cultural mechanisms” rather than absolute truths.<sup>2</sup> In other words, if

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<sup>1</sup> A note on pronouns – Drag Queens often are (but not always) cis-gendered (a term meaning that an individual agrees with the gender that they were assigned at birth), homosexual men. However, we refer to each other with she/her/her’s pronouns when in Drag, and sometimes even out of Drag. I will do the same in this document when referring to my Drag Sisters Feral Ann Wilde and Linnox Green.

<sup>2</sup> Butler’s use of the word “imitation” does not imply that gender is a stable category. Gender, according to Butler, is instable and inconsistent. So, we are always already doing Drag.

a Drag performer can don the appearance of any given sex/gender in addition to the affectations popularly associated with that gender, then it demonstrates that those attributes are not necessarily innate and finite as typically believed. These attributes are choices that one can change at will if only one is conscious of these alternatives. Anyone of any gender can impersonate a gender of their choosing.

This idea of the imitative nature of gender resonates strongly with me. I was not conscious of alternative ways of being while I attended Brigham Young University, a private university owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Throughout my time registered as a student at BYU, I donned daily heteronormative drag as their Honor Code – the required standards of grooming and conduct – forbade the declaration of gay identification.<sup>3</sup> I had to cover my gay orientation and dress conservatively in order to pursue an education. I had to, like Esther Newton (who penned *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* [1972]), engage impersonation of the gender that I was assigned-at-birth in order to survive the collegiate closet.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> BYU clarified their Honor Code in April of 2007 saying that “One’s stated sexual orientation is not an Honor Code issue,” but that the university “will respond to homosexual behavior rather than to feelings or orientation” (Walch, 2007). Out of paranoia, I would still attempt to maintain a heterosexual façade.

<sup>4</sup> I met Esther Newton in April 2016 when I visited Chicago to attend her Distinguished Alumni speech at the University of Chicago. For her dissertation, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Newton had followed Drag Queens around for the greater portion of 2 years, holding intimate interviews, hanging out backstage while Queens prepared, and attending many Drag shows at several of the Gay-friendly bars in Chicago at the time. I was able to hold a brief conversation with her and asked her why she felt an affinity with Drag Queens. She mentioned that she felt an affinity with Drag Queens because she, identifying as a “butch lesbian,” had to enact female impersonation in order to survive the collegiate closet.

Contrary to my undergrad experience, I found Drag to be a therapeutic playground in which I could extend and explore my multiple selves through the art form's technologies.<sup>5</sup> There is a rich bed of discussion in and around gender identity and expression. To present different aspects of Drag and further these discussions, I proposed a class as part of the Utah Teaching Assistantship through the graduate school at the University of Utah. The class was approved and entitled "Dragging Gender into the Twenty-first Century." After one of my lectures, I asked my students if we could create a working list of tasks that Drag accomplishes. As a class, we agreed that Drag:

- Entertains
- Uncovers repressed emotions
- Forms a way of escapism
- Is a safe way to say the unspeakable
- Questions the validity of gender (the binary fixation)
- Questions the innateness of biological determinism
- Offers a different way to think about gender performativity
- Possibly reinforces gender stereotypes
- Creates a sticky space of debate
- Builds community

Many of the above points became part of the backbone for my thesis choreography.

Namely, I wanted to entertain. I wanted to question the binary fixation of gender and poke fun at that particular institution by showing diverse ways of being in the world. This builds into my desire to model and offer different ways to think about gender performativity – something that should be explored and not a situation of duress.

*Shane held many roles in the creation of this event. He was a choreographer,*

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<sup>5</sup> Drag technologies are the material implementations that help shapeshift the individual accomplishing any desired transformation. The materials required depends on the style of Drag that one is attempting to do. Hip and butt pads to change the silhouette. Gaff or duct tape to smooth external genitalia. A compression shirt to flatten breasts. Makeup, prosthetics, wigs, costuming, etc.

*director, music editor, and performer. As a performer, he becomes me, Janice Janice Janice – one part muppet, one part pop-rock star, and one part disgruntled housewife (amiright ladies?). I would love to interject my two cents and kiki<sup>6</sup> with you about things! My thoughts as Janice Janice Janice may appear less “academic” as Shane’s voice and will appear in italics.*

### **My Mormon Life**

Shapeshifting is a pragmatic alteration to fit certain needs. One of those needs is confronting the misconception that we are singular, constant entities – a concept I sought to confront through my choreography. Bodies and identities evolve.

One example of this misconception of stable identity is “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” published by the LDS church in 1995. According to this document, “gender is an eternal aspect of your being.” To say gender is eternal means that it is a fixed segment of your being. Within this institution, gender delineations are a serious and sacred matter.<sup>7</sup> My gender was to determine my whole life.

Growing up, I felt tensions between “being a boy,” my interests, and the need to hide these interests. I lacked most of the curiosities that other individuals deemed male-at-birth were said to typically – naturally – have. In addition to my behavioral oddities, I became aware of my sexual desire for other male individuals at a fairly young age. I was around 12 years old when I first acknowledged my inklings for men. I knew that this was not socially acceptable because of indications from my parents.

Once I turned 18, my father called me as I was away from home attending

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<sup>6</sup> To kiki means to “girl talk,” chit chat, or talk in a familial manner (Huba, 2016, p. 171).

<sup>7</sup> This is not a belief unique to the LDS institution.

Brigham Young University (where all the Good Mormon Boys<sup>8</sup> go), and informed me that it was time to get the necessary paperwork ready to send off to Church headquarters in application to be a missionary. As an obedient GMB does, I prepared my paperwork and was called to the Paris France mission.

It was on the mission that I felt the greatest need to cover my identity. There was no room for shapeshifting. That is not to say growth wasn't encouraged, but rather any growth that was encouraged was cookie cutter and homogenous, deemed appropriate for a GMB. I was told that the spiritual growth gained during 2 years on a mission was the equivalent to 40 years' spiritual growth in the "secular" world. This cultural statement made the mission experience appear to be a means to an end of permanently squashing my gay self, a deviation from the script predetermined for me and one that my parents would eventually find shameful and that would create a rift between us.<sup>9</sup>

After the mission, I returned to BYU where my queer curiosities led me to explore Queer and Gender studies. I found the courses at that university to have the LDS slant – only offering writings by LDS personalities. I graduated in 2013 and later would return to higher education in pursuit of a Masters in Fine Arts in modern dance. I still yearned to attend courses that explored Queer and Gender studies. It was at the

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<sup>8</sup> A Good Mormon Boy, or GMB, follows the flow dictated to him from birth without question. He is baptized at 8, is inducted into the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods at 12 and 18, respectfully, and then goes on a proselyting mission at that same age (when I departed on a mission, the designated age was 19).

<sup>9</sup> My parents and I didn't speak with each other for a good amount of time. We are now on speaking terms, but I have yet to hear from them that my being gay is okay. I do want to mention that they have been supportive in other ways. I am fortunate in this case as many queer individuals lack supportive parents.

University of Utah that I found more variety in the presentation of these discourses. My instructors and peers pushed my thinking to go beyond binaries. There are multiple ways to inhabit our carbon shells beyond the restrictive and limiting binary systems. It is taught by some that sex and gender are not inextricably linked, and may be fluid.

My experiences in covering my identity to appease my parents and subsequent studies of Queer and Gender studies served as foundations upon which I structured an alternate identity – an alternate identity that celebrated the play between all facets of gender performativity, rather than a dated understanding of singularity.

*My name, Janice Janice Janice, came from Shane's favorite muppet, Janice in the Electric Mayhem band from the Muppet show and movies. She's always saying funny, quirky things out of the blue like "... so I told him, no sir, I won't take off my clothes for just anyone. Even if it is 'artistic.' " I love that! Then, Jan's voice muttering repeatedly "Marcia Marcia Marcia "on the Brady Bunch came to mind and SNAP! I had a name. That's where the muppet portion of my identity comes from. The Pop-Rock star? I love the styles of late 80's early to mid-90's music icons of Madonna, Janet Jackson, Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, etc. I love mixing the styles of those eras together in my outfits. Disgruntled housewife? I'm not pleased with the status quo and I want to demolish it.*

### **Different Styles of Drag Performance**

Drag has a plethora of styles and approaches. The following is not meant to be exhaustive but more as a list of styles that I have witnessed through various venues across Salt Lake City.

#### **Pageant Drag**

Also described as "High" Drag, Pageant Drag seeks to present a "female illusion." Performers known as "Queens" use the Drag technologies of foam pads to imitate an hourglass figure. Makeup is used to "feminize" the face. Queens use contouring to create

shadows that create the illusion of higher cheek bones and a thinner nose. Lipstick is used to overdraw lips when competing. Queens are awarded/penalized for their possession or lack of nails, rhinestones on ball-gowns, and poise. During these pageants, Queens must prepare several looks to fit into different categories.

One of the leading contenders in the pageant scene in Salt Lake City is a Queen named Gia Bianca Stephens. Gia runs the “Beauties on Broadway” Drag brunch held at Club 50 West in downtown Salt Lake City. Her modus operandi is to promote love and self-acceptance. At these shows, Gia invites performers to self-govern in costume and performance choice. She does not micromanage what they perform, beyond ensuring that no two queens perform to the same song.

Gia was able to speak candidly with my students about her approach to Drag. She stated that she does not become a different person when she gets in Drag. Rather Drag is an opportunity for her to “extend and enhance” herself.

I witnessed this in action as one of four backup dancers who supported her as she competed for the regional title Miss Central States, a preliminary pageant for the national title of Miss Gay America. During this pageant, I observed Gia transforming from an aggressive snake, to a soft and seductive “chanteuse,” then becoming the regal and statuesque Queen in the ball gown category.

### **Female Celebrity Impersonation**

I juxtapose the figure of Gia with the director of the competing Drag Brunch, Jason CoZmo who identifies as a Female Celebrity Impersonator over being a Drag Queen. I admire Jason CoZmo’s ability to shapeshift. Throughout one of his shows,

CoZmo changes from Marilyn Monroe, to Bette Midler, to Lucille Ball, culminating in the impersonator's favorite – Dolly Parton. During Jason CoZmo's Dolly Parton set, he changes costume four to five times within the 20-minute duration. Most impressive, however, are the differences in embodiment that CoZmo exhibits appropriate for each celebrity he impersonates. CoZmo does not believe Drag to be an extension of himself. He uses the art form to become a completely different person removed from himself.

Under CoZmo, I participated in a handful of shows in the summer of 2017. I was cast as the Lady Gaga impersonator of his show. Differing from the loose grip approach of Gia's leadership of the "Beauties on Broadway," CoZmo operates with a heavy hand. He maintains control over all aspects of his performers, from songs, costumes, even down to the very names his performers can call themselves. CoZmo requires that his performers go by male names, stating that would help the show to be taken more seriously. This led to my departure from the show. I did not respond well to having my performances so micromanaged. I resonate more closely with performing as a Drag Queen rather than as a Female Impersonator.

*When I first read the notice from Jason CoZmo, that I would not be able to go by my name in his show, I was angry. I am Janice Janice Janice and will go by no other name. When I tell people my name, I get the same general reaction of a little giggle and a smile. That's what I want to do – I just want to be a good time gal and make people happy, even if for a blip of a moment. I have no desire to be taken seriously. Point me in the direction of a "serious" Drag Queen or Female Impersonator and I will go in the opposite direction.*

## **Gender Bent Drag**

Salt Lake City houses a Gender Bending Drag group known as the "Bad Kids." This group runs a monthly show entitled Weirdo. Here one would see performances akin



to the Club Kids of New York. Performers are neither rewarded nor punished for the presence or lack of hip padding or nails on their fingertips. One is celebrated for having “off the wall” stylistic choices. Not only do the performers dress in Drag, but the crowd in attendance comes dressed for the occasion as well. All play with the gender codes, and rather than being beholden to one set of gender codes, they mix and mash them up into a colorful stew of self-expression, as if to say, “I’m not one, nor the other, but I inhabit and flow through ALL the genders.”

It was in one of the Weirdo shows that I performed an act in which I was reacting to a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ policy change. In November of 2015, the LDS leadership revised their church handbook that stated that same-sex married couples were apostates and that children being raised by these couples were to wait for baptism until they are 18, conditional on whether these children are willing to “disavow” their parents. I had many conflicting feelings about the issue and was upset due the gross overgeneralization given by church leadership in defense of this policy change. D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Quorum of the twelve apostles, mentioned that they would not want to burden young children with having to choose between their parents or the church (Mormon Newsroom, 2015). I found this reductive. In my research, I found interviews conducted by correspondents on National Public Radio in which they spoke with same-sex couples who were in fact in favor of their children being inducted into membership with the church; in fact, they were on the path to having them baptized. Due to this policy, they were forced to cancel these plans (Martin, 2015).

I felt inspired to construct a solo that was a reaction to this phenomenon. I started onstage, dressed in missionary drag (white shirt, tie, black slacks), dancing and lip-

syncing to dialogue from D. Todd Christofferson's interview, and statements from individuals interviewed divulging their complicated thoughts on the issue. Then I stripped off the missionary drag to reveal mesh shirt and tights that revealed my black dance belt underneath. I then stepped into leather high heel boots and stomped the stage to a remix of Britney Spears' single entitled "I Wanna Go" lip-syncing the lyrics "taking out my freak tonight." It was a liberating performance in that I was viscerally moving out and away from the restrictive drag that the LDS church commanded that I garb myself within.

My next performance at a Weirdo was more fun and, to be honest, less thought out. I wore a hot pink afro, a matching bright pink shimmery beard, and tucked my external genitals to blend the gender codes within my body. Over light purple tights, I wore black tights of floral design. I lip-synced and grooved to the song "Beard" by a *RuPaul's Drag Race* alum Alaska Thunderfuvk 5000. During the bridge, the lyrics go as follows, "A symbol of age and wisdom, the beard has long been dominated by the male of the species, but we welcome a new age, wherein this power can be wielded by the masculine or the feminine. Man, or woman, or..." and a dance beat takes over.

I wanted to continue the research of the essence of these two performances into my thesis work – to allow the freak flags of others to fly high and proudly and to explore the idea of empowerment in gender expression, however an individual chooses to encode themselves.

### **Modern dance as a medium of self-expression**

I had begun my undergraduate degree in the Film and Media Arts program at Brigham Young University. Upon being told that my film art was to "testify of Jesus

Christ and Joseph Smith,” I left the program. My older sister then encouraged me to take a modern dance class. I signed up for the beginning nonmajor course and fell in love with modern dance. My first instructor, Jana Shumway, took care to dispel any misconceptions on the art form and taught me how to tap into my inner viscera through movement. Being creative through movement helped me to access something primal of which I was previously unaware. The instructor presented modern dance as a place to break rules, find yourself, and to create your own style. This lured me in. I developed a thirst to dance and perform in a way that was constantly evolving and shifting.

That same semester, I attended a dance concert of the Repertory Dance Theater, a Salt Lake City-based company. This concert was entitled “Chairs” and was choreographed by Zvi Goetheiner. The choreography was lush and explored different human relationships and rituals. One duet was between two male lovers who danced in the company. They danced on top of a single chair. Partnering was supportive and incredibly close, leaving little to no negative space between them. This struck a chord within the latent queer that I was then.

This concert inspired me to audition for the modern dance program at BYU. I was, to my surprise, accepted and I started on a journey of movement discovery. In my undergraduate studies, I learned of Modern Dance’s open creative approaches, its plethora of uncoded movement, and trust in the body and its natural movements.

My proudest moment of movement discovery occurred with my undergraduate senior capstone project. I conceived of the concept for it lying awake one night, trying to cope with the tension of living authentically or completing my education at BYU, where living an out gay life was not tolerable or allowed. As I lay awake, one of my roommates

had started his laundry in the washing machine, which was located almost directly above my head on the floor above me. The repetitive sound of the washing machine created an undercurrent of agitation for my predicament. Suddenly, I sat up in bed and determined to choreograph my senior capstone project on that moment lying in bed, listening to the sounds of a washing machine, bothered by the cultural pressure to stay a GMB.

I collaborated with five dancers to create this piece. We worked with the imagery of a washing machine cycle, throughout which I requested that my dancers shed their layered costumes in the topsy-turvy of motion. This shedding of layers signified the liberation from external forces that restrict us from becoming ourselves. As more layers were stripped away, the more the dancers were “able” to connect.

I had taken risks at BYU to complete this piece. I had demonstrated trust in my dancers enough to come out as gay to them – so they would understand the emotion behind the movement. As I was becoming more honest with myself, I was becoming more honest with others. My shedding of a “protective” layer aided me to connect to my dancers and we constructed a dance that I am still proud of today. It was an implicitly queer piece, and later, once I had been studying out from under the infrastructure of the LDS church, I wanted to make an outlandishly loud and “in your face” queer evening. What better way to do that than by serving up some weird barefoot stuff with a side of Drag Queens?

### **My Plan to Integrate Modern Dance and Drag**

Originally, at my thesis project’s inception, I had wanted all my cast to be in cross-gendered Drag: women becoming Drag Kings with glitter beards and in pants,

button up shirts, and ties to harken to the missionary drag that I donned for 730 consecutive days. Men would be doing Drag Queening. However, RuPaul's statement that "you're born naked and then the rest is Drag" (RuPaul, 1995, p. 34), kept cycling through my head. It also occurred to me that I wanted to have more contemporary movement than is typically present in a Drag show. Some Drag technologies would not yield for great range of motion and could inhibit expressivity.

Drag goes beyond the outer appearance. Drag is how appearance meets movement. Does the performer work or counter stereotype or fluctuate between the two? I asked that each of my dancers work through the idea of "cross-gesturing." Cross-gesturing occurs when one shapeshifts through stereotyped codes attributed to one typed body.

There were some "Drag" numbers and then more modern "dancey" numbers. One of my objectives was to explore questions that I had about gender identity and expression and to allow my performers to present themselves in an authentic light. My primary goal was to put on a fun night, where performer and audience would not be far from each other and where space would be shared and individuals would be celebrated for who they are. This is part of the reasoning for not performing on the proscenium stage at the Marriott Center for Dance where certain "high-art" expectations might have diminished my event.

I am not the first to get this idea to put modern dance elements and Drag elements together in the same program.<sup>10</sup> I was not trying to reinvent the wheel, I was more

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<sup>10</sup> I would be remiss if I did not make some comment about the Ballet Trockadero, which does feature men dancing in roles traditionally given to female-bodied individuals in

interested in doing it my own way. I was working largely from my intuition and as Eric Handman (director of the Modern Dance graduate program) states, “following the perfume.”

I wanted my thesis work to serve as a mirror. Ideally, those that engage with my work will depart, questioning, even if it is for a second, their own gender identity. In the grander picture, we are far more than just our gender. Gender should not be a predetermining factor for who we are and what we would like to do in the world. I would encourage having fun in claiming space, asserting one’s own persona, and allowing others the space to do the same.

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classic ballets. These men paint their faces in Drag Queen style, wear tutus, and dance on pointe. It was not my goal to merely flip roles in preexisting work similar to this company.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

I tackled the topic of gender through nine performative works, approaching each work with a different impetus and creative method. The result was a whole cast group piece, Drag acts, a women's modern quartet, and solos.

#### **Off Campus Location**

“We Gender: And So Can You!” was performed at Metro Music Hall in downtown Salt Lake City on March 24<sup>th</sup> 2017. I had hoped to perform in a club, with a thrust stage, in order to have a more intimate experience. It was important to reach farther than the Marriott Center for Dance audience and attract an audience who may not have been exposed to academic discussions about gender. I also sought to expose club-goers to modern dance.

I wanted to split my dances into three acts and to allow dance breaks between sets. My desire was for the audience to unleash during these breaks and to dance and mingle. Proscenium dance theater does not allow for this kind of engagement, because the audience is set into rising rows and situated facing forward. I wanted to give my audience the freedom to move about, find different vantage points from which to

observe the performances, and also give them the freedom to leave if they were not interested in what was being presented. This would result in having a shapeshifting audience body that would create an energy that my performers could feel up close.

My personal philosophy is that everybody can and should dance. It was my goal that people would come to the event to both watch and participate, to move their bodies, to claim space in the performing space while my performers were not performing in it, and to allow others to do the same.

### **Obstacles in Securing a Place**

I had intended to perform the evening a semester sooner (when is typical in the modern dance graduate program) and I had secured a venue. I spoke to the owner at Club X that houses one of the Drag brunches in town. He was excited about the event and we agreed that I would pay for security and then I would keep everything from the door. I was amazed at his generosity.

However, my committee requested that I postpone the performance and dive deeper into the creative process to refine, polish, and clean the choreography. I conceded and decided to postpone into the next semester. I attempted to inform the club owner of this, yet I did not receive a response. I felt that my event had become an orphan and I started over – shopping around for another venue.

I sent an email to the event coordinators at Metro Music Hall, which on occasion houses Drag shows, headliners most commonly being Drag queens who have competed on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I had inaccurately thought that the staff would not be interested in housing my event as I did not have any large headliners as performers.



Remarkably, the owners were excited and we discussed logistics. My event had a home.

### **Creating the Choreography**

I will discuss the blossoming and performance of each piece in the order in which they were performed. I casted my Drag sisters, a friend with whom I danced during my undergraduate career, current students, and alumni from the University of Utah dance program.

#### **First Set**

As stated before, I divided the works into three sets. The first set's dances were high energy, introductory pieces that exhibited play.

#### *Opener*

In order to usher the audience into the seemingly incongruent experience of Drag and modern dance, an opener was necessary – an introductory dance that would glue these various acts together from the beginning.

In her book “Working It: RuPaul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style” (2010), RuPaul affirms that “where you start and I begin is an illusion (RuPaul, 2010). I wanted to explore that idea through movement.

*Shane and I are, more or less, one and the same. However, I am the more confident version of Shane, who is the mousy/dorky lovable yet guarded nerd. I have less borders around me. I like to invite people into my world through bringing them into my performances. We wanted to do the same here right off the bat.*

***Rehearsal process.*** I tasked my dancers to split into pairs. I consciously paired

my drag sisters with the more “trained” dancers. They were to watch their partners dance for a short amount of time then to switch off and the other partner would move. After this period of dancing and observation, they constructed short solos that were in mimicry of their partner’s movement style, trying to embody how the other person moves through space. I saw this as a movement exercise in metaphorically trying on another person’s shoes. Even though this did not end up in the final piece, it was important for them to create this connection with each other.

It was in this piece that I brought in cross-gesturing. I challenged my dancers to come up with four “masculine” and four “feminine” gestures or poses. Movement was to be styled as appropriate for how my dancers defined the terms for themselves. After creating these eight gestures, using chance mechanisms, they created the order for their gestures. The goal was to make these gestures distinct and then to make them blur<sup>11</sup> together through the phrasing of the poses together. My dancers had to shapeshift throughout many modes of being, which included aggressive, upright, and in your face, to retreated and low.

These gestural phrases began the piece. We entered from all sides of the thrust stage and then alongside the perimeter, we performed our gestural phrases, facing out towards the audience, inches away from them. After repeating these phrases twice, we moved into the center of the space and altered our phrases to interact with each other.

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<sup>11</sup> “Blur” was in fact the title of my thesis proposal, which I used as jumping off point for my thesis work. I had created a duet with two assigned-female-at-birth individuals. There was a final segment where they had these eight gestures (four masculine, four feminine) and their two distinct phrases were to be done blurring from one gesture to the next. I wanted to revisit this moment from my proposal.

Through this blurring from one gesture to another, our bodies moving in this manner diminished the distinctness of the categorization of each word away from being “masculine” or “feminine.” I chose to have both assigned-female-at-birth and assigned-male-at-birth individuals performing this cross-gesturing to show how bodies of all shapes, sizes, and sexes can exhibit various attributes.

***Performance.** As I entered the space, initiating the other dancers to follow me and begin their poses, I was able to immediately notice and really see my audience. I shifted through my poses – one had a puffed-up chest, the next I was low to the ground and coyly looked over my shoulder, the next standing with my knees together and biting my pointer finger – I looked into the eyes of the audience, standing on the stage right section of the thrust stage. With each change in pose, the audience member at whom I looked would reciprocate a playful shoulder twitch, or smile at me, or even mirror my pose. This for me broke down the performer/observer relationship as we were all performing in a fashion. Then after shifting through my eight poses twice through, I transitioned into the center of the space to interact with the other dancers. Here, my poses changed as I came into physical contact with the other dancers one after another. I chuckled as I did my puffed-up chest pose in Linnox’s direction, making the pose less aggressive and more of an internal joke. At the end of the piece, I was in the front of the group. I moved slowly in a serpentine pathway and the rest of the group shadowed me. My last move was a soft bicep curl with each arm, the right arm I kissed, then walked off the stage along with my Drag sisters. The rest of the group kept on shadowing each other then helped transition the set pieces – two rolling clothing racks, and three chairs – in preparation for the next dance.*

### *Drag Trios*

From the inception of the idea of my event, I knew that I wanted to work collaboratively with my Drag Sisters Feral Ann Wilde and Linnox Green with whom I started Drag in Provo at the premier Drag pageant in Utah County called the “Righteous Miss Provo” pageant. They have been positive influences in my life since. Vocal in their personal beliefs concerning gender and Drag, they believe that the individual should not have to satisfy any checklists from exterior demands. I wanted to involve

them because they are educated about gender expression and Drag, through their own lived experience and personal research. I desired to give light to the freedom that they have found through performative gender play. My Drag sisters continually infuse their beliefs and politics about gender into their Drag costuming and performances. We constructed two different trios together, one to Shamir's "Make a Scene" and one to "At the Ballet" from the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* (1975). Both dances were made with the goal to be campy.<sup>12</sup>

**"Make a Scene."** I wanted to create a piece that showed the transformative effect of getting in Drag and showcase our sisterhood. Within queer circles, there are many who feel disconnected from their families of birth, so they will find a chosen family. Feral Ann Wilde and Linnox Green are both my chosen sisters. I prize my connection with them and I wanted to celebrate that in my thesis event – to make a scene!

**"Make a Scene" rehearsal process.** Neither of my Drag sisters had been trained in modern dance or contemporary movement, yet I was determined to hold rehearsals the same way as I would with my university-trained dancers and my creative process nonmajors course. At the beginning of each rehearsal, we would warm up to prepare our bodies to dance. As I did with my other casts, I led them through exercises to tap into

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag in "Notes on 'Camp'" (1999) defines the term as a cult sensibility of artifice and exaggeration, extravagance and theatricality over subtlety. This style is useful in that it allows for parody and frivolity – two things that I wanted to incorporate as I was poking fun at the institution of gender.

the Patterns of Total Body Connectivity<sup>13</sup> to enhance their functionality to support their expressivity, which both Feral and Linnox possess.

In collaborating with all the dancers, I hoped that they could inject the dance with self-generated movements. With this particular cast and piece, we crafted “chair-ography.” We did this through an approach that I’ve done before. We would pass the responsibility of creating eight counts of movement until that segment was complete, working largely from immediate reaction to impetus. This “chair-ography” segment was to imitate makeup application. After this section, Linnox and I would retrieve a dress from the on-stage clothing rolling racks and assist Feral with the first sartorial transformation, helping Feral slip into her elegant black mermaid gown (*that she made herself!*). Feral would then “strut her stuff” in a fashion that Linnox and I would do in our own way after each of our respective transformations. In earlier versions of the choreography, I had kept the transformations until the very end. My committee had watched the piece and encouraged me to put them sooner, to more effectively give each transformation their due. After each of us slipped into our respective costumes, we’d physicalize the effect that that article of clothing had on us.

*After Linnox and Feral helped me into my handmade glittered black lace Freakum dress,<sup>14</sup> I radiated movement from my core and out the palms of my hands. I felt like jumping and twirling all over the stage accessing my inner Beyoncé.*

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<sup>13</sup> Patterns of Total Body Connectivity, part of the Bartinieff Fundamentals system, bring a “lively interplay” between inner connectivity (efficient body function) and outer expressivity (Hackney, p. 43). These patterns are: Breath, Core Distal, Head Tail, Upper Lower, Body Half, Cross Lateral. Working through each pattern allows for dynamic movement to support unique expression.

<sup>14</sup> A Freakum dress is usually short and skin tight.

Rehearsing the onstage costume changes had its obstacles. We broke Feral's zipper in rehearsal. The stretch fabric on Linnox's gown got bunched up and we'd have to make doubly sure that the fabric was draping correctly. With my selected dress, the glitter lace fabric would become stuck on my tights. But on the whole, we overcame and figured out how to get the dresses on, and beating these obstacles made these moments more transcendent and celebratory.

The final moments of the dance were to include the donning of wigs and circling the performance space to posture for the audience, and then assuming final body poses accompanied by the final accents in the music.

**Music.** I wanted to tap into the lyrics of the song, "Life's no answers, just one big mess, so why not, go out and make a scene... So don't complain, complain, complain, Just do something, something, something." What I appreciate about the lyrics is that they come across to me as very mindful and "in the moment." The song is a celebration of what you are in any given moment and an encouragement to make a scene with that entity. Why would we want to blend in? To merely pass without being noticed?

To parallel the lyrics, we planned to begin the piece in our undergarments (bras and tights) and wig caps on our heads. We interacted primarily with each other but kept aware of the audience to highlight the mindfulness of the "getting-ready" ritual.

**Performance.** Feral's charisma made up for her lack of dance training. Her embodiment was larger than life and she shapeshifted throughout the evening and her aura reached the audience. Feral struggled with the chair-ography and didn't quite shift her weight efficiently, but that is more a sign of my weak coaching than of her

performance skills. Linnox commanded and made the movement her own. As Feral and I lifted Linnox, she was an embodiment of joy.

*We had a blast performing this number, and from the audience reaction, the audience had fun too. From the beginning as we walked on in just our undergarments, through the lifts that we performed together, to the moments when we helped each other into our dresses, it was affirming to hear their exclamations of pleasure!*

### *Women's Quartet*

In reading for a Gender Studies course, I came across a striking quote from Sara Ahmed in her work “Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others” (2006). Ahmed speaks to how we are physically oriented to objects, which then causes us to take action toward that object. When people are repeatedly oriented and pushed towards certain objects, that trains the body and this orientation becomes hard to alter. Ahmed states that “What we do do, influences what we can do” (p. 60). If we believe that certain bodies cannot do a certain task, then it is not taken up to train those bodies to do so. Subsequently certain bodies are not trained and do not develop the ability to perform that task. It becomes widely believed and taught that those bodies cannot do them.

This passage inspired me to create a women's piece. I wanted to explore women's strength, femininity, athleticism, poise, cooperation, and endurance. I was not trying to say anything conclusive about femininity or womanhood, but rather broaden the terms. I wanted to allow space for each of my performers to showcase their unique brand of femininity. I put out a casting call through social media (Facebook and Instagram) and posted posters throughout the dance school, LGBT resource center, and the Gender Studies office. This casting call was asking for women of all identities to be

in the piece. It was also important to me to find dancers, of all training experiences, who found this topic as something of value. I wanted to explode the binary terms of “woman” and “feminine” by presenting a varied interpretation of those words.

From the outset, I doubted my qualifications for choreographing a dance piece about womanhood and femininity. I found comfort in the process from my Gender Studies Debates course with Wanda Pillow, during which we watched a video interview with choreographer Cyn Oliver, who was taking up her project of “Virgo Man-Dem.” Oliver noted that she had been bombarded with negative stereotypes about Black men and wanted to explore a more nuanced approach to the expansiveness of men and masculinities (note the plurality). In this interview, she notes her apprehension on tackling this topic as a woman. However, she worked side-by-side with her dancers rather than dictating how the dance should happen. I decided to follow in her footsteps and hoped that this was not a presumptuous task I was undertaking.

***Women’s quartet rehearsal process.*** At the first rehearsal, I led my dancers through a physical thinking exercise entitled the “Mash-up” body. I would shout out a word, and my dancers moved according to their interpretation. For example, I would say the word “strong” and some of my dancers would move stereotypically making flexed biceps, while others would dart through space, slicing through the air. I recorded this improvisational session and would refer back to this video for movement phrase material.

To further spark movement generation, I asked my dancers to write about a moment in their lives that they felt the most “free.” I challenged them to consider a time where they felt the least amount of outside pressures to perform themselves in a certain



prescribed manner. My dancers used numerous descriptors in writing their stories. After writing, the performers went back through their writing and circled all of the descriptors (verbs, adverbs, adjectives). These words became the structure of solo phrases that they created and I integrated into the piece.

As I integrated my collaborators' stories of freedom, my thoughts continually returned to the notion of training. I desired to parallel the notion of socialization along with the idea of dance training. I asked the women in my cast to write down two dance movements that they had yet to do in choreography. They wrote down these movements on separate cards that I then shuffled to fashion the order of what I dubbed the "atypical phrase." These movements included slides, leaps, turns, and kicking actions that we identified as often being gendered male in performance.

I desired them to dance as individuals, but also wanted to showcase the group as being a cooperative whole. To promote this, in rehearsal, I had them improvise in pairs, pouring weight into each other, rolling into different contact points, finding positions that might enable them to lift each other. Then they workshopped as a whole cast. Each one was to have a moment being lifted, being totally in the air, supported by the other three. They became a shapeshifting whole.

*During the lifting section of the women's piece, many people let out whoops and hollars of affirmations. We surprised the audience with one lift where one dancer stepped on the shoulders and over another dancer. It was exciting to me to hear their reactions.*

## **Second Set**

The second set involved more reflective pieces. "I Am What I Am" was a personal affirmation of self-love. "At the Ballet" was a campy redoing of a classical

Broadway moment wherein three women sought an escape from their lives through the beauty of an art form. Then “Nam A I Ma” was a broader illustration of the struggles of adhering to the shifting demands of hegemonic masculinity.

*“I Am What I Am”*

The musical *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) is about a gay couple who run a drag nightclub – Georges, the manager, and Albin, the star Drag Queen. This couple learns that their son is engaged to the daughter of a man who is the head of the “Tradition, Family, and Morality Party.” This man and his wife want to meet their daughter’s future in-laws, Georges and Albin – who is over-the-top flamboyant, an attribute not uncommon in those who do Drag. George and his son devise a plan to redecorate their home and ask Albin to be absent from the meeting – in order to not offend the more conservative parents of their son’s fiancé. At the end of Act One, when Albin learns of this plan, he refuses to cover his identity and delivers the gay anthem “I Am What I Am.”

This number speaks to me because it presents the unapologetic attitude that I am still striving to possess in regards to my identity. As this song fit the theme of the evening, I desired to choreograph an abstract solo. The soloist, queer himself, had been seeking out performance opportunities and was passionate about the number that I was proposing to premiere.

***“I Am What I Am” rehearsal process.*** With my soloist, we discussed his personal experience of coming out and finding strength through his path of self-actualization. Requesting that he keep this conversation going in an internal monologue,

I played the song and asked him to improvise. I videoed the improvisation session and we immediately watched it together and spoke through his experience of improvising to the song. He mentioned that throughout the song, he was thinking of his brothers and how he has processed the notion of masculinity throughout his life. The artist spoke to the importance of self-care and of the violence and opposition that one might experience while trying to find self-actualization.

We identified movements that we both wanted to keep and practiced those movements repeatedly. In later rehearsals, we co-created movement side-by-side. In addition to the intuitive movements that we came up with on the spot, I taught him phrase work that I had created for the climax of the song. I gave him the freedom to manipulate the movement as appropriate to how he was feeling inside his body and in tune with the music.

After these processes, there were still some holes in the choreography that needed to be filled. To create movement, I read out loud the lyrics to the songs in the moments that were empty and asked my soloist to do the first thing that his body felt the impulse to do. We did this repeatedly until he performed a movement that clicked for the both of us. Some of the movements were quite literal while others were more abstract.

***Performance.*** The “I Am What I Am” solo was a success, due largely to his capacity to interact with the audience. This soloist stated that it was a refreshing experience to perform for an audience that felt like a group of close friends. The audience exhibited a familial spirit. During the climax of the “I Am What I Am” solo, the dancer was choreographed to run around the perimeter of the performing space with

an outreached arm. To both mine and the soloist's surprise the audience held out their hands with palms open for high fives. I felt a collective moment of self-affirmation. People cheered him on as he claimed his identity for himself on his terms, echoing the lyrics of "I am what I am, I am my own special creation," as we all should be.

### *At the Ballet*

*Shane has struggled to pull his thoughts together about this piece and has ultimately left it up to me to speak to the inclusion of this dance in the event. Feral, Linnox, and I prepared a trio to the song from "A Chorus Line" (1975). I had heard Barbara Streisand cover this song on her album "Encore: Movie Partners Sing Broadway" with Anne Hathaway and Daisy Ridley. Upon hearing the song, I instantly thought of doing a trio along with Feral and Linnox. I thought it would be campy fun. We saw some irony in the whole affair as three assigned-male-at-birth individuals, dressed up as assigned-female-at-birth characters lip-syncing to the three experiences of these characters who sought out some beauty in the ballet. The irony coming to a point in the location – a club that usually houses rowdy rock concerts and drunk queer kids on different evenings – rather than a theater or other place of "high" art. Ultimately, this was a really silly piece. Feral was Sheila, Linnox was Bebe, and I was Maggie. To the opening music, the three of us used the rolling clothing racks as a ballet barre (which I thought was a clever idea), warming up for the coming audition/interviews. When told to "line up," "Bebe" and I rolled the racks to the back of the performance space as "Sheila" approached the off-stage director. When told to tell the director more about her parents, "Bebe" and I danced ostentatiously in the background, trying to pull focus. After "Sheila" reprimands us, we danced together, basket carrying "Sheila" during the lyrics "Graceful men lift lovely girls in white" – which got a fun reaction from the audience. "Bebe's" interview was next and throughout, we lifted her and posed making a big moment of "Every prince has got to have his swan," with perching Linnox on my leg. During my interview, I just wanted to act as stupid, making my lip-sync as exaggerated as possible. I couldn't have done this piece without my sisters. They got my humor and really tapped into the silly cartoonishness that I was going for. We were fortunate enough to perform this piece again down at a bar in Provo called City Limits. The stage set-up was similar to how we performed it at Metro Music Hall, so it was a fairly easy transfer. We received similar reactions as before and were even told that it was the best act that evening.*

*Nam A I Ma?*

The semester before we performed my thesis event, I was attending a course in partial completion of the gender studies graduate certificate. The course, entitled “Men of Color Masculinities,” explored topics concerning the diasporic struggles of men of color in relation to hegemonic<sup>15</sup> masculinity. Part of the readings for the course included a chapter from David Valentine’s book “Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category” (2007), a study of the origin of the word “transgender.” Some people accepted the word as part of their identity, yet others did not feel the necessity of the label. They stated that they knew who they were and no word would give them any more clarity (pp. 105-140).

In the middle of reading the assigned chapter, I had to pause. I had to look away from the pages and ask myself, “Am I a man?” I asked it out loud and allowed for the question to simply hang in the air around me. The air around me felt thick as I waited for an answer that never arrived. I have never felt innately as a “man.” So much of my life I have been told that I was a boy, eventually becoming a man, and I never felt as such; I simply didn’t know what that meant. In my current evolution, I would rather not have the descriptor of “man” ascribed to my body.<sup>16</sup>

Reading this chapter from Valentine, I recalled an interview in *Alright, Darling*

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<sup>15</sup> Hegemony is the multilayer system through which the dominant group achieves power over time and “through the production of an interlocking system of ideas which persuaded people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives” (Halberstam, p.17).

<sup>16</sup> I feel that the descriptor of “man” presents a certain default setting, which I do not fulfill. The term is too limited to describe who, and what, I am.

magazine, a publication dedicated to gender deviants, with Katya Zamolodzichova, the winner of Miss Congeniality on *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 7. Katya discusses her phenomenological experience in Drag. Katya says that she has

never known what it feels like to be a man or feel like a woman. I just assume. There's such a complete disconnect between my physical reality and my identity... I don't know really what it feels like to be a man or a woman. I don't feel like either. I never have. (p. 26)

This drove me to create a piece exploring masculinity. As I was exploring femininity earlier, I wanted to explore the idea of maleness and the many disparate demands from across the board on those who have been assigned male-at-birth. It was important for me to research the binary of masculine/feminine. I wanted to break down the boundaries of the categories, and promote the idea that we all have fluctuating mixtures of both within us.

***Rehearsal process.*** To cast my dancer, I asked a friend with whom I danced as an undergraduate student at BYU and in a few projects since graduation. We had had parallel journeys coming to deal with our queer identities at the conservative institution. However, we were isolated from each other while under the BYU infrastructure.

The very first thing that I did with my dancer was to interview him about his experience with the coming out process. For many queer people, coming out is something that we all have in common (imagine if we lived in a world in which we didn't have to come out. A world that already had equality in all the genders and sexual orientations). I discussed with him the phases that I saw in his journey.

With these agreed upon phases, I assigned Laban efforts<sup>17</sup> in hopes of creating the vocabulary for the piece. I decided to create a score and keep his journey of coming out in chronological order. As my dancer improvised through this score, I would take notes on moments that I would like to see again and through this process we discovered movements that ended up in the final performance.

Harkening back to the moment reading the Valentine chapter, I asked my soloist if he would ask out loud in the studio, “Am I a man?” With each time he asked the question, he was to change his inflection and body posturing. Throughout this improvisation, I observed him and drew stick figures of his posturing on pieces of paper that had each of the phases of his coming out. This helped to make the score more concrete. The body postures would then serve as bookmarks for the entire movement and phrasing.

It occurred to me that this question was in essence “backwards,” so I asked my soloist to audibly ask the question in reverse, which became, “Nam a I ma?” In rehearsals, the soloist would code switch between different affectations and ask that question out loud. I would take note, and we eventually came up with an order. Using chance mechanisms, I plotted out a pathway to travel throughout the opening section. This audible asking of the question was later removed from the final performance, but I asked my soloist to have the question on a loop in his internal monologue as he

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Laban created a way to look at not only dance but movement in order to break it apart to arrive to the meaning of the movement. Laban’s Efforts are the dynamics, intent, or the “how” that “reveals the inner mood” (Hackney, p. 43). With my soloist, we concentrated on the following efforts: Flow – fluctuating between Bound and Free, Weight – Light and Strong, and Time – Sustained and Sudden.

performed.

After this “coming out” section, we crafted a middle section where my soloist would pull in members of the audience to serve as space markers and examples of “the ideal man.” Early in the process, I asked him to locomote throughout the studio space and describe for me “the ideal man.” I recorded what he would say. What ended up in the final performance:

that’s it, the perfect mixture of sweet and musky... seen that outfit this week before, twice maybe?... nothing too formfitting... loose, hangs off a sense of broadness, square... present here, present there, present everywhere... Tall... Shoes are clunky, makes for a clumsy sort of walk... nothing too ornate like those, or those... Practical!... Defiant!... All the right lines in all the right places... it’s five o’clock somewhere and you make it look good... hair’s kept short. Nothing crazy, so it’s easy to just get up and goooOOOO!... Always ready. Ready to attack. Ready to pounce. Run!.... White.

The soloist brought on six people at different points of his speaking. This occurred when he spoke about the scent of a man, the clothing of a man, height, defiance, five o’clock shadow, and then skin color – “white.” Each person that was brought forward was to represent different aspects of the “default” man. This then melded with a section in which I was working with the imagery of a pinball machine section. I created a soundscore from recordings of pinball machines to reflect the metaphoric bouncing around that I feel from the contrasting and at times contradicting demands of hegemonic masculinity. In hir<sup>18</sup> work *Gender Outlaw* (1994), Kate Bornstein writes, “I know I’m not a man – about that much I’m very clear ... a world that insists we be one or the other – a world that doesn’t bother to tell us exactly what one or the other is” (p. 8). The

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<sup>18</sup> Bornstein’s desired pronouns – ze/hir/hir’s



pressures of being up to par with masculine demands is always in flux, and one must literally be on one's toes to keep up with these altering demands.

This piece was important to me in that it called for a dismissal of trying to adhere to the strict demands of what it means to be a man. After bouncing around from the six people that he brought onstage, the soloist stopped and then led each person back out of the performance space – revealing just him in the end. After quoting a movement phrase from another solo in the event (that of Linnox Green's "They Used to be Mine"), the soloist decelerated yet maintained expansiveness in his body.

**Music choice.** In my academic dance education, I have been encouraged to avoid using film score music as backdrop for my choreography. As a film score addict, I have found it difficult to abstain. Yet with this particular solo, I intentionally wanted to tie it into the conversation at large in the media by using the music composed by Nicholas Britell from the movie *Moonlight*, best picture winner of 2016. My soloist and I watched the film together as part of our research. This film, in my opinion, is, at its core, exploring one individual's journey to self-discovery and battling with the social construction of masculinity. I did hope that people would recognize the music and think about the parallels between the piece and with the movie *Moonlight*.

**Performance.** The reception to "Nam A I Ma" was tangible. The bar was noticeably quiet during this particular moment. The soloist felt validated in the words and movements that he was doing. I was pleased that those audience members who were selected for the pinball machine segment cooperated with the performer. There was a fear that people would be intoxicated and interrupt the piece. However, when they were brought onstage, they maintained formation. They did turn to see what was going

on around them during the piece and I appreciated that curiosity. The soloist's breaking of the fourth wall during the spoken segment captivated the audience. One audience member approached me and told me that they were not expecting to be provoked to think during this performance. They were expecting a fun and frivolous evening, instead, they walked away with a few questions. This piece helped to teach the audience that performativity is not unique to one body/gender/sexuality – it is a shared experience.

### **Third Set**

The third set contained three Drag solos performed by my Drag sisters and me. Tonally, each piece was different. Feral Ann Wilde's Solo was coy, coquettish, playing with the Drag and Burlesque forms. Linnox Green's solo was a humble presentation of someone getting pulled in all directions. My solo as Janice Janice Janice was a bombastic, fast-paced number to close the concert.

### *They Used to Be Mine*

Linnox and I had similar if not equally stifling relationships regarding gender identity. I consider her braver than I. Instead of staying at BYU and continuing to cover, like I did, in order to get a degree, she withdrew from BYU and went to a more accepting university. She began expressing herself in ways that were taboo at the previous institution, such as wearing lipstick and skirts to class. I wanted to give her a solo in the event and highlight her as an example of self-acceptance and love.

***Rehearsal process.*** Linnox and I briefly held a conversation about the goals of

her solo performance. She had been wanting to do a particular solo based on a song about femininity. Linnox informed me of a couple of songs that she felt an affinity to, “A Woman’s Worth” by Kate Bush and “She Used to Be Mine” by Sarah Bareilles. I took both of these songs and I recorded myself improvising in the faculty studio. I re-watched these videos and referenced them with the mash-up body improvisation that I did with both Feral and Linnox before our trio rehearsals. I then came up with phrase work to teach Linnox.

Linnox was not as attuned to the idea of improvisation when it came to the idea of a solo and asked me give her set movement to remember. From my improvisational sessions to the songs that she suggested, I created and taught her the movement. This was hard for me as a choreographer/director. I wanted both of us to come up with the movement together. This was because I wanted Linnox to organically perform the movement. For it to spring forth out of her.

To show the inner conflict of the character in the song, I created elastic movement to highlight the tug and pulls that a person undergoes when trying to appease all the demands of gender policing. In the choreography, Linnox reached an arm in one direction, yet her body would be thrust in the opposite direction – as if by some outside force. I developed a gesture with a turn – hands in fist placed one over the other on her stomach, carving in arcs that effected the entire torso. When it comes to matters of fulfilling others desires, I at times feel this guttural churning, I imagine it would be similar to seasickness.

Up until the dress rehearsal, Linnox was skipping segments of choreographic material. I had the theory that once she had undergone her ritual of applying makeup

and donned her costume,<sup>19</sup> she would remember her sequencing and command the space during the performance to deliver a powerful performance.

**Music choice.** I had generated the movement for this solo improvising to both of the songs that Linnox had selected. However, after Linnox tried the movement to both songs, we felt that “She Used to Be Mine,” from the musical *Waitress* (2016), matched with the created gestures and movement. We rehearsed to the recording that Bareillis did herself. I found Bareillis’ performance of the song was less maudlin than the original cast member who performed it on Broadway. I wanted the grappling of the subject matter to be readily apparent to the audience, without being overly hokey.

The song’s central theme expands beyond illustrating the plight of an individual assigned female-at-birth. I decided to change all of the She/Her pronouns to the gender neutral They/Them/Their, and then to change all other pronouns in kind. This was in hopes that we would create a more gender-inclusive piece that dug at the heart of the human experience of trying to find someone who would love and appreciate them for who they are. The love here need not be limited to a romantic love either, but could also include a platonic or familial love. The phenomenon in the song is not unique to any gender or demographic.

As there was not any recording of the song that existed with these pronoun changes, I decided to play it on the piano. One evening, my roommate was practicing on her guitar and singing. I found her singing beautiful. I asked her to sing the song for the

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<sup>19</sup> Linnox wore a sheer black fabric shirt that flowed. Through it you could see her undergarments- plain black bra and panties. This was not intended to be sexual. We wanted a certain vulnerability to show through. Boots instead of heels were selected to add a touch more of gender bending/play to the show.

performance. She agreed and we began holding our own rehearsals at home, me on my keyboard and she next to me with her voice.

***Performance.*** Linnox had been nervous and was forgetting choreography and freezing during our final rehearsals together. I encouraged her in those moments to improvise in the style of movement created. I had a theory that once she had on her face (makeup) and was in her costume, wig, and combat boots, and had an audience, that she would be able to trust her body and remember the sequence of the solo.

The night of the performance came and we applied our faces. She seemed more visibly at ease. Linnox took her time and to my observation she breathed more than she had in rehearsal. Movements were not rushed and thrown away. There seemed to be an extension of time. I also saw a bit of an awareness of the audience and Linnox invited the audience into the experience. She fumbled with steps in the final performance, but on the whole, the muses inspired and supported her throughout the performance. The lack of dance training did not detract from any meaning-making.

### *Feral Ann Wilde Solo*

Feral Ann Wilde is the epitome of being unapologetic about who she is and moving through space, yet in saying that she also allows others to claim their own right to space themselves. I have always adored working with Feral. She is easy for me to be around. There is the stereotype of the catty, bitchy Drag Queen; Feral contradicts this stereotype. She can dish it out when she needs to – for instance when one of her friends or family is disrespected – yet outside of these moments, she will be respectful to everyone as is their due right.

***Inspiration.*** I mentioned that Feral is untrained in dance, which is not entirely true. She has casually studied, for her own Drag performances, the discipline of Burlesque. Burlesque draws attention to body parts through teasing reveals of skin. Throughout her Drag career, Feral has received many messages over social media from her adorers and haters alike. They claim that she is too large to do burlesque type acts. Feral protests this. She is an embodiment of self-love and body positivity. I thought that this would be a fun inclusion into the evening, yet I wanted to put my own little spin on the act. I wanted Feral to take off one more layer beyond what she has typically done in her previous performances – I wanted her to remove her breastplate.

The breastplate is one Drag technology that is used by some Drag Queens. These are high quality silicone moldings with the likeness of real human breasts. Feral uses them from time to time. Other times, bags of rice, or pantyhose stuffed with polyfil, or even – for the most practical of us – tube socks turned in on themselves are used to imitate breasts (the silicone breastplates are quite expensive, ranging in price from 400 to 700 US dollars). Depending on the Drag Queen, breast imitation can be geared to be convincing in their female illusion or be exaggerated for the sake of comedy/satire.

When thinking about Drag and impersonating women's bodies, I constantly go back to one moment in the film *Erin Brockovich* (2000) where one of the victims of the water poisoning in the town had to have both a double mastectomy and a hysterectomy to remove cancer that resulted from the radiation. The title character visits the victim in this scene and attempts to console her. Through tears, the radiation victim inquires whether she can still be a woman if she does not have a uterus or breasts.

I juxtapose a parallel moment that has been of equal inspiration to me. In the documentary, *Mr. Angel* (2013), the audience is introduced to transgender porn star turned transgender activist, self-dubbed the transgender community's "Tranpa." There is a moment in the film where he is answering emails from other trans individuals who are pleading for help for their desired surgeries. Tranpa Angel tells the camera that he has not had all these surgeries himself and that "[he] *doesn't need a penis to be a man*" (italics mine).

This was a jarring moment for me. What *does* it take to be a man or a woman? I do not believe body parts should be the sole marker for an individual's gender identity. I believe that gender goes far deeper. It is my hope that we can get to a post-genitalia-determining-one's-gender society and that we can all self-actualize in our own selection of what our gender to be. I began collaborating on a solo with Feral that would assert that breasts do not make the woman, nor do they make the Drag Queen.

***Rehearsal process.*** Warming up became an important ritual between the two of us as we worked on this solo. On the subject of warming up, Feral reflected that the warmups were one of the highlights of the creative process. The emotions we shared doing the exercises side-by-side helped us to reclaim our own spaces, to rediscover our surroundings, and to explore them. To make our presence, a palatable, vivid experience. Breathing itself became a conscious decision; an opportunity to express a rediscovered language.

After warming up, we worked on this idea of "waking up" the body. I wanted to feature Feral coming more in touch with her own body. We crafted phrasing where Feral would use her fingers to spider crawl up her side and up to her shoulder on the same

side, then skip to the opposite shoulder. With a couple of taps, Feral wakes up that shoulder and it begins to weave back and forth smoothly. The weaving becomes larger and eventually leads to Feral turning around and confronting the audience with a seductive stare. She then would wake up her supporting leg, and would act surprised gesturing to this leg, mouthing “what is this?” We worked on showing pleasure in her face as her body becomes more and more alive.

Following this body reawakening phrasing, we worked on the order of the sartorial transformation – going from clothed to barely clothed – and a metaphysical transformation. That is to say, we collaborated on the order of the stripping off each article of clothing. I wanted this piece to project an image that as the more pieces were removed from her body, she was taking off the artifice of Drag and also breaking down the illusion of gender.

I wanted the climax to be the celebratory removal of the breastplate. A few weeks before the final performance, we worked with two other cast members to provide backup and to enter the piece with large feathered fans. We planned to have them cover Feral, for her to playfully gesture that all is not yet removed. Feral would remove the breastplate and dip them below the fans and bring them back up. Then she would toss them to the front of the performance area. Finally, Feral would burst through the covering fans to shimmy her boy chest, with pasties covering the nipples. The assistants would shadow Feral, following in a figure eight throughout the space stepping out and making large kinesphere movements, allowing energy to pour out from the core through her distal edges.



*Janice Janice Janice Solo*

I worked on a solo to a mix of songs with the intention of empowering those deemed “effeminate.” My goals when I get into Drag is to be counter-effeminiphobia (fear of effeminacy in bodies assigned-male-at-birth). I also wanted to show off what I was able to do in a pair of heels, a skill to which many people are typically not oriented.

**Music.** I created the mix first, before I began generating movement for my solo. I worked with a member of the dance faculty who challenged me to make a list of all the songs that I had thought to include in the mix and then to splice out the moments of each song that I thought were important. We then worked together to put the “meaningful” songs towards the beginning and then the more up-tempo numbers to close the mix off with a bang.

My mix was created from many popular songs by leading pop artists, including Madonna, Whitney Houston, Joanna Newsom, Britney Spears, Lana Del Rey, Cher, and Shania Twain. Each song presents a different singular view of femininity and it was my hope that these songs mixed side-by-side would present a more dynamic idea of femininities.

*Many of the songs were indeed exploring what it meant to be a woman, but I felt that it was exploring my personal power. Many of Shane’s modern dance technique teacher people would give him the note that he is too brusque to make it in the world of modern dance, so when Shane transforms into me and I take the stage in my six-inch heels I unleash with the movement that is natural to the both of us. Here in Drag form, I am celebrated for how I move. Does Shane “know” who he is? No, neither do I. Does anyone really know who they are? That’s why we included Joanna Newsom’s “Divers” (2015) that asks “how do you choose your form? How do you choose your name? How do you choose your life?” and then my personal favorite part of the song, “How do you choose the time you must exhale and kick and rise?” Good question, Ha!*

**Rehearsal process.** With the mix completed, I played the mix repeatedly and

allowed my body to respond according to impulse. I recorded myself and then would immediately watch my recording to note which movements I found effective. I tried to have stark shifts between each song's clip to illuminate the feelings behind each song. This, for me, spoke to code switching and how people must shift constantly and alter according to the contingencies of improvisation in daily life. I never really "set" the entirety of the movement but created bookmarks along with the score that my mix created. I wanted to leave room to react to the audience in the final performance.

***Performance.** It always feels good to command the stage, but in this situation, it felt all the more powerful. I was performing a piece that was not only celebrating my own gender deviancy, but calling out all people who feel marginalized to advance and charge through space. As Cher sang about "rising above" I felt my spirits lift and my body took control. Shane has a tendency to overthink things, yet when he allows me to take over, we are more able to let go and just "be."*

### **Audience Reception**

I did not expect the turnout, in fact there was a small part of me that had hoped for a smaller audience to allow everyone to be on the front row. I believe that the postponement from the previous semester had helped to create more anticipation and allowed people to carve out the time to attend.

The performing space was on the same level as the audience, on the dance floor. We had prepared for a thrust stage, with the audience surrounding the performing area on three sides. The audience seemed hesitant as I invited them to come around to the sides of the area. I needed to do some metaphoric poking and prodding until they did. I also made a request for audience members to negotiate among themselves to allow shorter people to come to the front of each side. I wanted the audience to interact and be

present in the space together.

I learned that choreography for that style of theater has more to consider than frontal proscenium theaters. Not to discredit the ability to connect or speak to an audience from the vantage point of the proscenium stage, but there is a different energy from the reciprocal feeding from each other that can happen when the audience is so close. I learned that I like performing in such an arena. I enjoy making eye contact with the audience. The pieces that worked best on the thrust stage were the Drag trios. Those pieces were easier to plan moments to play to the audience wrapping around three-fourths of the stage. If I were able to perform this evening again, I would make sure that everyone who came to see the performance would be able to see. It occurs to me now that I should have set up some risers around the performance space. To have some people standing on the floor, while others stood behind the front line on some risers. I did notice some audience members standing on tables and chairs to get a better view. This was an unfortunate oversight on my part, I simply did not anticipate that many people would come. It occurs to me that I may have allowed rare, negative occurrences, such as a dancer dropping out of the process because she “didn’t want to dance about gender,” to cloud my thoughts and unfairly predict a small turnout to the event.

Before the third set, one of the Metro staff suggested that I invite a portion of the audience to sit on the lip of the stage for a band ‘behind’ us. I should have stressed this more that they could surround us on all sides and then informed my dancers to make slight alterations throughout their performance to acknowledge, perform to that section of the audience as well. This challenged us to adapt to the contingencies of the moment.

My moments of emceeing needed more practice. Statements about the atypical

stage setting should have been rehearsed while I also could have had announcements prepared in order between sets, with the assistance of a “god mic” to assist the audience through transitional moments between pieces and sets. This way, I could have also more formally introduced the dancers by name before or after the performance of each piece.

A dancer from my Women’s quartet noted that while the space was one of the most intimate and small spaces that she had performed in her dance career, it was also one of the most liberating. She felt that being in close proximity to the audience brought out a bold, flirty, energetic, and larger-than-life quality in her performance. Energy was tangibly felt between performers and audience alike. Another dancer in reflection told me that she had to access vulnerability that she had yet to throughout her dancing career. She mentions that she felt the support of the audience during and after the performance.

## CHAPTER 3

## CONCLUSION

Jack Halberstam, in their work *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), restructures the terms “failure” and “serious.” According to Halberstam, failure is a success. Success in the shedding of the shackles of trying to succeed in ways others have done before. To be “serious” is to tread down paths that have already been traveled, perpetuating the status quo (p. 6). I do not find pleasure in being serious. I rather seek to create new knowledge – new knowledge revolving around gender. To do that, I believe that I must fail in our heteronormative and capitalist society.

I realize that I am a master of failure. My thesis journey has been fraught with failure – to properly produce my event in the semester that I ought to have. I failed to choreograph works that were sophisticated, refined, and serious. I failed to finish this document in time to graduate in the semester that I was supposed to complete my degree. My life parallels these failures. I have failed and continue to fail, to perform as a man. I failed to continue in the faith that I was raised in. And I have failed to be a serious person.

Apart from these failures, I had many successes. I made people laugh and smile with this event. My audience reached out to each other, crossed boundaries, and left with

a baby kernel of a thought or two. The Drag trios were my personal highlight. I felt the connection and sisterhood between us and the transformative effect of both dance and Drag during each of these pieces. It was a source of pride to show these works to a mixed audience, some of whom who were expecting a Drag show, while others were expecting a modern dance show.

I enjoyed debriefing with my close friends in the cast after the show. My “Nam A I Ma?” soloist told me that he overheard people speaking, unwinding and dissecting the evening’s works. He informed me that he overheard that they were not expecting the evening to be as impactful. I was largely aiming to produce a fun and frivolous evening to model silliness and irreverence in the light of gender. It made me happy to hear that the evening had an emotional impact on my audience.

It was a joy to witness the audience “get down” in-between sets. There was a moment of hesitation at the first pause for them to start dancing, but after they let loose, they took advantage to perform themselves in the delineated performance space. I had encouraged them to claim space. Not only had I invited people to come and witness dance performance, but I had invited them to come and participate.

I created space for people to belong. Before the program began, I walked around to introduce myself and thank people for coming. I did not want a division between performer and audience. I had encouraged my dancers to do the same. They socialized with their friends and other audience members before Mika’s “Origin of Love” cued them to enter the space to perform the Opener. This, I was told came to a delightful surprise to some in my audience who did not expect dancers to enter from all directions. This succeeded in creating an immersive experience.

“We Gender: And So Can You” was less a “serious” modern dance thesis work, and more a call to my audience to take the institution of gender less seriously – possibly even to fail at gender – to carve out one’s own paths and to claim space one’s own terms, without being beholden to the rules that one doesn’t want to follow in the first place. To play. To transform. To shapeshift.

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